

INTRODUCTION

SIX DEGREES OF ALEISTER CROWLEY

IN 2002, THE BBC POLLED its viewers and listeners to compile a list of the Top 100 Britons of all time. Political figures (such as #1, Winston Churchill), literati, and assorted celebrities dominated the list that emerged, to no surprise.¹ Coming in at #73, just behind King Henry V and just ahead of Scotland's Robert the Bruce, was Aleister Crowley. Best known in his day as the "Wickedest Man in the World" or, as he liked to call himself, "The Great Beast 666," Crowley seems an odd entry for such a list. During his time on Earth, his infamy grew far greater than his fame. Nevertheless, in the nearly sixty years since his death in relative obscurity, Crowley has become a countercultural icon. Even if this falls short of the god-like status he yearned for, it doubtless would gratify him.

Aleister Crowley is, few would argue, the father of modern occultism, neopaganism, and New Age spirituality. Today's Thelemites (avowed followers of Crowley and his spiritual doctrine of Thelema) far outnumber the small cadre he recruited in his lifetime. His motto "Do What Thou Wilt" has had a subtle and profound influence on modern culture. While some still fear and loathe him, Aleister Crowley inspires fascination, even admiration, in others.

Crowley's identification with the occult overshadows his achievements in other spheres. He was a record-setting mountaineer, an outstanding chess player, and a talented or at least popular poet and writer. He also collected an amazingly wide array of friendships and acquaintances, albeit mostly brief, and some regretted. Aleister Crowley had connections of but a few degrees to many of the prominent literary, artistic, and political figures of the early twentieth century. For example, his erstwhile friend and famed military theorist Col. J.F.C. Fuller was also a guest at Adolf Hitler's fiftieth birthday celebration. Another friend, the journalist Walter Duranty, became Stalin's favorite and apologist. Crowley had numerous links to Churchill, among them the writer Frank Harris, a guest at Churchill's nuptials.

A large number of Crowley's associates shared his interest in the occult, and a substantial minority were his partners in sex, drug-taking, magical rites, and other activities licit and

illicit. Much less appreciated is that many of these same individuals also connected Crowley to the intelligence world. Throughout his adult life, Crowley associated with people who were, had been, or would be spies. When one of this ilk moved out of Crowley's life, another, as if by magic, appeared to take his or her place. These relationships and transitions were more than coincidence. Hidden behind his occultism and real or feigned depravity was Crowley's sporadic work as a secret agent for Her/His Majesty's Government. This book illuminates that deliberately obscured and much-disputed aspect of his life.

In 1999, I was deep into researching the complicated and perplexing career of the "Ace of Spies," Sidney Reilly. Intriguing synchronicities kept appearing between the movements of Reilly and Crowley. Most intriguing was the men's overlapping presence in World War I in New York City, where Reilly was working, in his own devious way, for Britain's "secret service." Crowley later claimed to have been doing the same, despite the blatant anti-British propaganda he had been writing for pro-German magazines during much of that time. Not surprisingly, Crowley's subsequent protestations of loyal secret service to England mostly were dismissed as face-saving fantasy.

Still, the question seemed interesting enough to merit a look at whatever American security agencies' records might hold on the subject. Eventually the files of the U.S. Army's old Military Intelligence Division yielded a thin dossier on Crowley's WWI activities. This handful of documents contained one critical piece of information: during the war, American investigators, while probing the activities of suspected German spies, discovered that "Aleister Crowley was an employee of the British Government . . . in this country on official business of which the British Consul, New York City has full cognizance."² Thus Crowley's claim to have been His Majesty's servant was true after all, at least to some degree. Of course, this leads to the harder questions: what he did and with whom, and *why*. My preliminary exploration of those and related issues, "Secret Agent 666: Aleister Crowley and British Intelligence in America, 1914–1918," appeared in the *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence* in fall 2000.³ Still immersed in the Reilly book and with other research projects in the pipeline, I did not intend to dig any deeper into Crowley's intrigues.

Over the next few years, however, the article achieved a peculiar life of its own. Crowley fans, Crowley-haters, and others simply intrigued spread it across the Internet. Before long, I was receiving messages offering comments, information, and above all encouragement to look further into Crowley's involvement in espionage. Reluctantly at first, but with mounting enthusiasm as pieces of the puzzle came together, I went to work. The result is this book.

One of the first things to become apparent was that Crowley's secret activities during WWI were part of an involvement in clandestine affairs dating back to his student days at Cambridge University and continuing into the Second World War. The central problem, and my main reservation about the topic, was the dearth of

documented, i.e. hard, evidence. The answers to most of the key questions presumably would be in the archives of the British intelligence and security services, MI6 and MI5. Unfortunately, those records were subject to a blanket exclusion from public access, an exemption that remains in effect even under the more recent freedom-of-information statute in the U.K.⁴

I knew from personal experience, however, that the same agencies made the rare exception to this rule when it suited their purposes to do so. As one of a handful of persons to receive access (dubbed a “briefing”) to Sidney Reilly’s MI6 dossier, I hoped that an appeal to the same authorities might result in like access to Crowley’s. After due consideration, MI6 politely but firmly declined my request.⁵ Per standard procedure, they even avoided admitting outright that any such file existed. They were thoughtful enough, however, to provide an interesting list of press references to Crowley that must have come from just such a file.

I had greater hope of success with MI5, the British internal security agency. Over the past several years “5” has declassified and released to the public numerous files on persons and events of “historical significance,” particularly those connected to espionage. Someone as notorious as Aleister Crowley, a man of numerous and dubious associations and publicly accused of treason, degeneracy, satanism, and worse, could not have escaped their notice. MI5’s initial reply in early 2003 was therefore a surprise. “I am afraid we are unable to help you in your quest for material on Crowley,” it read, “as, contrary to your assumption, it would appear we never had a file on him.”⁶ The letter went on to explain that this was not necessarily as strange as it might seem, because “despite his bizarre antics the view may well have been taken that that Crowley did not represent a threat to security.” Was this an indirect admission that Crowley had collaborated with MI5, or at least that the agency had some assurance that his “antics” presented no threat?

Not long after I received that letter, a 1930s MI5 document emerged from the Public Record Office (the main component of the British National Archives) that bore a cross-listing reference to another agency file, PP 2573, CROWLEY. Further evidence showed this was, indeed, Aleister Crowley. So I wrote again to MI5. After considerable delay, the ever-polite response began with an apology for “having misled you . . . when we said we never held a record for Aleister Crowley.”⁷ In fact, the writer continued, my most recent letter “has helped us establish that we did indeed hold a record for him under that PP reference. . . . Sadly, it was destroyed (we think) in the 1950s when large numbers of records which seemed at that point to have outlived their usefulness were destroyed.” Furthermore, there was no indication, the letter concluded, as to “why or when Crowley attracted our attention.”

I was confused and dissatisfied to say the least. First MI5 asserted that there had never been a file; then, confronted with evidence of it, they admitted its existence

and theorized that it had been destroyed. The matter took a further twist with the discovery of another document, a page from a 1916 British “Black List,” which cited two Crowley MI5 files, and evidently much earlier ones. And so I wrote a third letter. One of the indicated files, PF (“Personal File”) 2573, appeared to be an earlier version of the file noted above, but with a different prefix. That turned out to be so, but MI5 could offer no information about the change in prefix or even what “PP” meant. The eventual answer is intriguing, as we will see. The second file, PF 1943, somehow was overlooked not once but twice by MI5’s archivists. Their only theory about it was that it had been “destroyed some years ago also.”⁸

Was all this vacillation the result of untidy files, or part of a calculated secretiveness? Why would Crowley’s files have been destroyed, when older dossiers on persons of no more “historical significance” were preserved? A reasonable person could suspect that the explanations were not altogether complete or forthright.

Of course, even if MI5 and MI6 had revealed the contents of their Crowley files, questions would have remained, and for every question answered, at least one other would be raised. Moreover, such files end up in the researcher’s hands only after thorough “weeding.” This can leave a meager or misleading residue of the unredacted version. Furthermore, as items may be excised from a dossier, so too may they be *added*.

Other archival materials in Britain still offered hope of information on Crowley. An appeal to the records of the Home Office, including the WWII Office of Home Security, produced a flat denial of having any files on Crowley. A like query to the Metropolitan Police (i.e. Scotland Yard) produced no response whatsoever beyond an automated acknowledgment of the request. As we will see, at least one person claims to have seen a Crowley MI5 file during WWII, and the Beast himself acknowledged that Scotland Yard kept an extensive record of his antics.

A search of the voluminous files of the British Foreign Office, however, had more promising results, or so it initially seemed. The Index to Foreign Office Correspondence, 1906–1919 yielded three file references, including two, FO 371/2541 and 371/4264, that related to Crowley’s 1914–1919 activities. But it was the same old story. Many of these older files have not survived past purges, and all three were among the missing. An imaginative person might suspect a concerted effort to erase Aleister Crowley from the official record.

Such difficulties were not exclusively on the British end. Inquiries as recent as 2006 to the FBI under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act elicited the reply that the Bureau held “no records” relevant to Aleister, a.k.a. Edward Alexander, Crowley.⁹ This reply somehow overlooked a small file on the Beast that the Bureau had released in response to another FOIA request in 1982.¹⁰ Moreover, a *second* Crowley file surfaced amid the WWI-era records of the FBI’s predecessor, the Bureau of Investigation.

I recount all this to sketch what I looked for, what I found, and the pitfalls and

frustrations I encountered. The historian's saving grace in cases of such bureaucratic secrecy is the weeders' inability, no matter how hard they work, to expunge everything. As documents travel from one agency to another and are cross-referenced to other files, things fall between the gaps. From such gaps had the Crowley MI5 references appeared.

The practical result of this lack of documentary record is that I must rely more on circumstantial evidence and informed speculation than I would prefer. That almost led me to abandon the project, before I pieced together everything I had. That synoptic view, a reminder that the weight of circumstantial evidence can be compelling, and has sent more than one man to Death Row, encouraged me to go on.

Traces of the Beast's intelligence-related activities roughly divide into three evidentiary tiers. First are those persons and things with *known* connections to Crowley. Second come those that are *probable* in light of all the evidence. Finally there are mere *possibilities* generated by circumstances and relationships. Throughout the book, I will do my best to make these categories clear and distinct. The main focus of the book is on 1914–1919, both because Crowley's clandestine activities are better documented for that period, and because it was his most intense and prolonged involvement in espionage. Nevertheless this book will also demonstrate Crowley's long, if episodic, relationship with British and other intelligence bodies, involving many well-known historical events and persons.

One thing I want to make clear up front is that I neither follow Crowley's esoteric teachings nor have an ax to grind for or against him or them. Moreover, this book is not intended as a general biography of Crowley nor in any way a treatise on his writings or thought, and it takes no position on the reality of magic and the supernatural. However, I recognize that Crowley and many others did and do place great faith in such things. This book examines many of Crowley's better-known actions and associations in a new a light, taking some of them as indications of secret intelligence work. While such interpretations may seem to cast doubt on his mystical motives, this need not be so; the same magical retreat may be both essential to the health of the spirit and useful as a cover for spying.

Numerous Crowley biographies are available, offering a range of interpretations of the Magician. I found the recent works of Martin Booth, Richard Kaczynski, and Lawrence Sutin particularly useful, which is not to slight any others.¹¹ Even so, I have tried to avoid being too influenced or guided by any one work and always endeavored to stick to my own leads and intuitions. Inevitably, I developed my own opinion on Crowley, and it is fair to state that as best I can. Views of the man pretty much fall into three broad categories. Some see the self-proclaimed Great Beast 666 as little better than the Devil incarnate, a depraved, evil, and insidious spiritual influence on his generation and those since. While this view has declined in recent decades, Craig Heimbichner's *Blood on the Altar*, which portrays Crowley as the propagator of "the world's most dangerous secret society," demonstrates its enduring appeal.¹² Next are such works as Daniel P. Mannix's obscure and sensationalist *The Beast* and Roger

Hutchinson's more recent and mainstream *The Beast Demystified*.¹³ These also take a dim view of Crowley, but as a sadistic, oversexed, egotistical monster whose mystical wisdom and "magickal" powers were so much delusion and fakery. Any talents he had, in this view, were insignificant beside his perverted and selfish behavior. The last view, arguably the most common, is that Crowley, despite many glaring flaws, was a man of genuine courage and brilliance, even genius. In many respects he was ahead of his time and misunderstood, and suffered accordingly. Generally, I agree with this last estimation. If not the monster some have described, Crowley certainly was capable of immense emotional and physical cruelty. Real flashes of insight illuminate his writings, but if he developed anything to an art, it was selfishness. Aleister Crowley would indeed have been fascinating to meet, but, as others have noted, I would be reluctant to leave my children or my money in his hands.

It might seem that someone so obsessively self-centered and disdainful of common decency as Aleister Crowley would make a poor spy. On the contrary, those very qualities helped to qualify him for the job. A strong, even ruthless, ego is essential for motivation and self-preservation; the only person the spy ultimately can rely on is himself. Espionage, street-level spying anyway, is at best morally suspect. One British intelligence veteran, Bickham Sweet-Escott, recalled being told at his recruitment, "All I can say is that if you join us, you mustn't be afraid of forgery, and you mustn't be afraid of murder."¹⁴ A 1950s contract agent for the CIA, George Hunter White, revealed this mindset with brutal candor when he recollected, "I toiled wholeheartedly in the vineyard because it was fun, fun, fun. Where else could a red-blooded American boy lie, cheat, steal, rape and pillage with the sanction and blessing of the all-highest?"¹⁵ Crowley, the proponent of "Do What Thou Wilt," would have found such an environment both convivial and rewarding on many levels.

Still, what would move a man with such evident contempt for the existing order to serve, indeed risk his life for, King and Country? In his *Confessions*, referring to 1914, Crowley explained his brand of patriotism:

I still think the English pot as black as the German kettle, and I am still willing to die in defense of that pot. Mine is the loyalty of Bill Sykes' dog . . . the fact that he starves me and beats me doesn't alter the fact that I am his dog, and I love him.¹⁶

More simply put, perhaps, "my country, right or wrong."

Crowley was a pariah and spiritual rebel, but he also longed for the "regular life of an English Gentleman."¹⁷ His role as a secret agent appealed not only to his ruthless, amoral side, but also to a profound sense of *Englishness* and an idiosyncratic but genuine sense of honor and duty.

- 1 www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2002/08-August/21/100_britons.shtml.
- 2 U.S. National Archives [USNA], Record Group 165, Military Intelligence Division [hereafter MID] file 10012-112, “General Summary”, Intelligence Officer, West Point, New York, 23 Sept. 1918
- 3 *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, Vol. 13, #3 (Fall 2000), 359–371.
- 4 This Act went into effect in January 2005.
- 5 J. Grey, Historical and Records Section, Cabinet Office to author, 9 Dec. 2002.
- 6 MI5, T. Denham to author, 20 Jan. 2003.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 8 April 2005.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 18 Oct. 2005.
- 9 David M. Hardy, Section Chief, Record/Information Dissemination Section, Federal Bureau of Investigation to author, 8 May 2006.
- 10 Thanks to Martin P. Starr for bringing this to my attention.
- 11 Martin Booth, *A Magick Life: The Biography of Aleister Crowley* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000), Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley* (Tempe, AZ: New Falcon, 2002), Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2000). Certainly not to be ignored are John Symonds’ early and critical *The Great Beast: The Life and Magick of Aleister Crowley* (London: Rider, 1951) and its later editions and Martin Booth’s *A Magick Life: The Biography of Aleister Crowley* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000).
- 12 Craig Heimbichner, *Blood on the Altar: The Secret History of the World’s Most Dangerous Secret Society* (Coeur d’Alene, ID: Independent History and Research, 2005).
- 13 Daniel P. Mannix, *The Beast* (New York: Ballantine, 1959), and Roger Hutchinson, *Aleister Crowley: The Beast Demystified* (Edinburgh and London: Mainstream, 1998).
- 14 Bruce Page, David Leitch and Philip Knightley, *Philby: The Spy Who Betrayed a Generation* (London: Sphere Books, 1969), 135, quoting Sweet-Escott, *Baker Street Irregular* (London: Methuen, 1965).
- 15 Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams: The CIA, LSD and the Sixties Rebellion* (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 32–35.
- 16 Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography* [hereafter, CAC], ed. by John Symonds and Kenneth Grant (New York: Hill & Wang, 1969), 761.
- 17 Sandy Robertson, *The Illustrated Beast: The Aleister Crowley Scrapbook* (Boston: Weiser Books, 1988), 39.